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Dusty

Rides Again

When Dusty, a 15-year-old Chincoteague pony, was rescued by his current owner, he had been suffering from severe laminitis (founder) and neglect for several years. The pony's affectionate nature and outgoing personality, though, soon made him a well-loved part of the family. But something was wrong, and Dusty needed help.

Several days before Dusty was brought to New Bolton Center, he had a severe episode of respiratory distress: when he was excited he made a loud "honking" noise while taking a breath. Dusty's local veterinarian had performed endoscopy and found that his trachea was collapsing, making it difficult for him to breathe. At New Bolton Center, tracheal collapse was confirmed through endoscopy and radiographs. The condition was most severe at the base of his neck, where the collapse was almost complete.

The trachea, or windpipe, is supported along its length by a number of circular rings of cartilage. The rings are not complete; they have an opening on top, facing the spine. Tracheal collapse occurs when this cartilage loses its stiffness, leading to a more flaccid trachea that cannot withstand the forces the diaphragm generates during respiration. Tracheal collapse is a relatively rare disease in horses—ponies and miniature horses are more often affected. In companion-animal medicine, the condition is most commonly seen in small-breed older dogs. To date, surgical treatment of tracheal collapse has only been

described in few horses, but several methods of surgical treatment have been well described for dogs.

Following consultation with **Dr. David Holt**, head of Surgery at the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital, Dusty was scheduled for an operation to place prosthetic rings on the outside of his trachea, which would hold the trachea in a more open position. Although Dusty is small for a horse, he is much bigger than the dogs that are generally treated, so rings had to be custom-made. With the help of New Bolton Center farrier **Rob Sigafos**, prosthetic rings made of polyethylene were created. While awaiting surgery, Dusty was kept comfortable with medical management, including bronchodilators and anti-inflammatories given through an inhaler, and kept quiet and cool in the air-conditioned intensive care unit.

Once the prosthetic rings were prepared, Dusty was taken to surgery. Dusty's primary veterinarian, third-year resident **Dr. Kira Epstein**, with the help of interns **Dr. Jim Nutt** and **Dr. Charlie Pinkham**, placed a total of 11 rings in Dusty's trachea for support. The pony did very well during surgery and was breathing easily when he recovered. The day after surgery, radiographs and endoscopy were repeated and confirmed that his trachea was much more open.

Dusty did not exhibit signs of any complications following surgery and was returned to the care of his owner. He—along with his owners—is continuing to breathe easily at home. ▀